

The Passenger Seat

MADELINE WISE

Rudy called his ex-wife from a dealership in San Francisco and blurted out, “I’ve got it, Mimi, and it’s all mine! Cadillac Esplanade!”

“Well, Jeez, Rudy,” Mimi said. “Jeez...”

“I’ll be there in half an hour, Mimi. Wait till you see it!” Rudy hung up. Mimi had no interest in seeing Rudy’s new car but she was pleased to hear life in his voice that wasn’t there during the rainy weeks of winter.

It was an April afternoon and, Mimi had almost finished weeding the small lily pond in her front yard. Sunlight caught a slice of orange, a flash of silver, as goldfish sought refuge in shadows beneath the lily pads. Mimi thought, That’s where I want to be right now—under a lily pad. She wondered if fish ever hid from their ex-spouses.

She also wondered why Rudy was coming straight to her house from the dealership. He could drive here blind, she thought, because it was our house for twenty-seven years. She hoped Delores wasn’t with him because it strained her patience to try to act civil. Delores was his flavor-of-the-month who kept pouring on the sweetness until she curled right up into Rudy’s wallet. And she had camped there for more months than Mimi wanted to think about.

Mimi’s own live-ins tended to be four-legged and temporary. She rescued animals. Currently, she had a wobbly black cat, two mixed breed dogs from the pound (the word mutt never grazed their ears) and her own silky terrier, Skye. Others came and went for short-term boarding.

In no time, it seemed to Mimi, Rudy rang her doorbell like a solicitor and when she opened the door, he said, "Thank you but no, I just gave at the Cadillac dealership."

"Rudy," Mimi said, totally deadpan, "you can't know how not funny you are."

She did a quick body scan, taking in his jungle-print shirt, navy sweats, and green Crocs with socks. He read her mind and said, "If your money's good, who cares how you dress?"

Rudy's more recent changes were still apparent: he was thinner and his pale face had become somewhat sallow. But his brown eyes seemed to glow with kid-like enthusiasm. Mimi followed Rudy to the driveway and noticed he had picked up his gait. His movements were energized and she thought, If I didn't know better, Rudy, you could almost convince me that you're still a healthy man.

Rudy wanted Mimi to like his car, so she said, "Wow. Oh, gee. It's nice." But she was too noncommittal for him, so he started asking questions.

"You like the color?"

"Hey, silver is good, yes," she said.

"What else?"

"Jeez, I like the size, it's a good size."

Rudy followed Mimi as she circled the car, peering through the windows. She thought, I drive a simple hatchback with space for a sheet of plywood and animal crates. That's all I need and Rudy knows that. I could fake enthusiasm for his car, but he'd know that, too. Turning toward him, Mimi said, "It doesn't matter what I like, or if I like it at all. It's yours, Rudy. You were always crazy about cars and now, finally, you have the one you want."

He opened the passenger door and gestured. "Please," he said. She wriggled into the seat, smelled leather, and spotted an array of buttons and gadgets that promised magic when pressed, pulled, turned or spoken to. The corners of Rudy's mouth formed a tight smile as he attempted to contain his excitement.

Now in the driver's seat, Rudy turned toward Mimi. His head dropped, his face relaxed, and wrinkles deepened into little folds. She waited for him to say something and he finally said, "Are you sure it's okay with you—I mean, buying this car?"

"Look, Rudy," she said, "you can second guess yourself, but you know me well. I'm not a chimp. Or, I mean, chump."

Rudy laughed and said, "Think of it as verb conjugation, Mimi: like swim, swam, swum only it's chimp, champ, chump. I chimped it and champed it, and then I chumped it."

"Dammit Rudy, that's only one of the reasons why we're not still married."

He raised an eyebrow. "Verb conjugation?"

She whispered, "Smartass."

Rudy straightened up a little and said, "So it's still a deal then?"

"Rudy, there is no deal," Mimi said. "You called me, you asked my opinion and I gave you an honest answer. We agreed that the money is still ours together because we earned it and invested it together." She paused and lowered her voice. "We know your prognosis—you've got some time. We've been over all of this before. Why shouldn't you have fun with this car? You and Delores. By the way, what does she think?"

Rudy hesitated for a moment, "She goes for luxury items."

Visions of Delores wearing new silk dresses and flashy jewelry—gifts from Rudy—swept through Mimi's mind. Over the past year,

Rudy had brought Delores to their children and grandchildren's birthday parties. "Of course," Mimi said, "I know that."

Rudy nodded as if to put the thought away. Then he took a long look at Mimi in the passenger seat and said, "I'll show you what this car can do for you, Mimi. You're going to like this—guaranteed. You don't look comfortable in that seat," he added, "so I'm going to customize it for you." Rudy pushed buttons and Mimi's seat came alive: It moved forward and backward, floated up and dropped down; it tilted to relieve pressure here and there, then it came up snug against the hollow of her back. When the mirrors and headrest were precisely correct, Rudy nodded and said, "Perfect. Custom made for you, Mimi. Every time you get in from now on, it'll return to that position."

"But Rudy," Mimi protested, "I don't plan to sit in this car 'from now on.'"

Rudy nodded and smiled. "I know, I know. Now here's what I want you to do: Push button number one and it'll be set."

"Number one," Mimi repeated, but just then Delores popped into her mind. "Uh, Rudy, I don't think so," she said. "I don't want to do that."

"Push number one," he repeated, his voice gentle but determined. She shook her head no.

"If you don't push it, I will."

Mimi reached out and pushed number one. She turned toward Rudy, "What's Delores going to think? She'll go ballistic won't she?" Rudy's thin shoulders gave the hint of a shrug and a slight grin crossed his face.

Long minutes passed with Mimi in the passenger seat, half-listening to Rudy's state-of-the-art Esplanade demo when their daughter,

Sally, drove up. Sally often dropped by on her way home from work. Mimi depended on Sal to rescue leftovers from the fridge, and baby talk to all of the animals. Sally was out of her car in an instant, her face showing wonder and bewilderment at the new Cadillac in the driveway with both parents in it.

Mimi scrambled from her seat thinking, Free at last! Rudy and Sal clasped each other, both of them talking at the same time and shaking with laughter. Sally then plopped into the passenger seat and Rudy relished the chance to show-and-tell again. As the demonstration ended, Sally was easily persuaded to press number two.

Rudy got out of the car and gazed toward the spring sun, then a bright lemon blaze in the west. "Better start moving toward home," he said. "Maybe there'll be time to take Delores for a ride before dinner."

Sally hugged her dad, glanced toward her mother, and turned toward the house with a satisfied smile. From the backyard and inside the house, dogs began to bark, Mimi's little Skye leading the chorus. Rudy started the engine, backed out of the driveway and lowered the window. "See you, Mimi."

Mimi nodded and managed a smile. She left the curb, stepped into the street and waved. Silver flashed in the distance as the car rounded a curve and disappeared. She lowered her head, sauntered toward the house and heard the faint tap-tap of Rudy's horn. □